

& again there is a future in those sparks
together, comrade, friend
we say this is our land & know at last it is our home

In spite of all the difficulties of the *nostos* theme (from old world to new world to old world and back again) narrated in *The Arrivants*, 'Word Making Man' proclaims a secure arrival. Benefiting from the painful homeward journey achieved in Césaire's *Cahier*, Brathwaite is able to improve on Odysseus's precarious arrival in Ithaca in book 13 of the *Odyssey*: the homecoming is signalled by both naming ('we say this is our land'), and recognition ('& know at last it is our home').²⁷ The homecoming proclaimed here is not an arrival in a physical space, since the land in question is the fragmentary Caribbean meta-nation or meta-archipelago, but rather an arrival in a tradition—to use Wilson Harris's term (1999: 187, 243). This tradition looks back to Césaire and through him to the omni-cultural affinities of the black poet in the new world, affinities with Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and the Americas.

²⁷ Walcott's latest collection, *White Egrets*, includes an Elegy for Césaire in which the latter is twice invoked as 'maître' (master), confirming Césaire's position as the architect of a pan-Caribbean literary tradition ('maître among makers') (Walcott 2010: 84).

The Africanness of Classicism in the Work of Toni Morrison

Tessa Roynon

Since the mid-1980s there has been a quiet but consistent scholarly interest in Toni Morrison's engagement with the classical tradition. Pioneers in this approach produced essays on individual novels, highlighting the presence of classical allusions in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Beloved* (1987). And in recent years, although Cook and Tatum pay Morrison scant attention in *African American Writers and Classical Tradition* (2010), Rankine (2006) and Walters (2007) have included useful analyses of the novelist in their monographs on black literary deployment of Graeco-Roman myth. My own work, moreover, has shown that her interactions with the classical tradition are fundamental to her radical critique of American culture.¹

My aim in this chapter is not to rehearse my previous argument, nor to reiterate in any detail the 'justifications' for critical study of Morrison's classical allusiveness: the fact that she studied four years of Latin at high school; was a Classics minor at Howard University in the 1950s (when the department was under the chairmanship of Frank Snowden Jr); or that she has frequently spoken of her interest in Greek tragedy, and so on. My intention here is rather to illuminate and discuss Morrison's interest in the *Africanness* of classicism. Specifically, this chapter demonstrates that an investment in the confluence between African and Greek and Roman cultures is a

¹ See Roynon (2007a), which includes an overview of scholarship on Morrison and the classical tradition, and Roynon (2007b).

significant feature of novels she published both before and after the appearance of Bernal's *Black Athena* in 1987. Recognizing the full implications of this investment is an important development both in our understanding of the Morrisonian *œuvre* and in the current Classical Receptionist focus on 'diasporic classics'.

In 1989 Morrison published one of the definitive essays of her career: 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken'. As part of this meditation on the perils of canon formation, she is emphatic in her praise for Bernal's work, describing it as a 'stunning investigation of the field', and lauding his account of both 'the *process* of the fabrication of Ancient Greece, and the *motives* for the fabrication' (Morrison 1989: 6–7; emphasis in original). It is perhaps for this endorsement that Bernal (2001: p. xi) includes Morrison in his list of those he thanks in *Black Athena Writes Back* for their 'great help and patient understanding'. It is crucial at the outset to acknowledge that this dialogue has taken place, not least because, to date, several scholars have mentioned Morrison and Bernal in the same breath without drawing attention to each one's salute to the other.² But, as my readings of key vignettes in her fiction demonstrate, Bernal's thesis about 'Afroasiatic roots' was hardly a moment of sudden revelation for Morrison. It rather comprised a detailed and apparently authoritative exploration of ideas that she—and a whole genealogy of black intellectuals before her—had always found compelling. In a 1985 interview Morrison described Greek tragedy as 'extremely sympathetic to Black culture and in some ways to African culture' (Taylor-Guthrie 1994: 181), while before her eulogy to Bernal in the 'Unspeakable' essay she describes feeling 'intellectually at home' in that classical genre (Morrison 1989: 2–3). In the following analyses of the seven novels that she published up to and including *Paradise* in 1998, I show that her allusiveness—to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for example, or to the texts in the Nag Hammadi library—is often a simultaneous invocation of Graeco-Roman and either West or North African cultural forms. It thus itself asserts the interconnectedness of African and European traditions that the dominant culture has obscured.³ In the very process of engaging classical culture she shows that she is not

² e.g. Gilroy (1993) or Jennings (2008). See Tally (2008) for further discussion of Morrison and Bernal.

³ For prior discussion of Morrison's use of the Nag Hammadi texts, see Tally (1999, 2001) and Conner (2000).

'borrowing from' or even insisting on her right to 'share' in a pure, white legacy. Instead, like Pauline Hopkins a century earlier (and like numerous other writers of the modern African diaspora), she is reappropriating a tradition that was never either pure or white.⁴

In *Crossroads in the Black Aegean* (2007: 3), Goff and Simpson observe that 'the preoccupation with how cultural artefacts move is a feature of much of the literature and theatre of the African diaspora'. They cite Ato Quayson's identification of 'the imperative driving this preoccupation as the necessity to salvage some historical and cultural integrity from the depredations of slavery, mass displacement, and colonial subordination', and they include his key observation that 'tradition' (which supplies the demand to 'salvage') is 'conspicuously rendered as a theme within the literatures of the diaspora' (Goff and Simpson 2007: 3). My reading of Morrison's African-inflected classical allusiveness argues that she effects a politically motivated 'restoration of Africa' to Graeco-Roman tradition, and it thus situates her within this model. At the same time, my examination of her interactions with the work of Wole Soyinka and John Mbiti, and of her separate interest in ancient Egyptian and Ethiopian cultures, is indebted to Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993). Gilroy (1993: 198, x) invaluablely defines 'tradition' both as 'the living memory of the changing same' and as 'a stimulus towards innovation and change'. Morrison's work at once anticipates and exemplifies these definitions.

Two recent monographs are relevant to my concerns in this chapter: *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa* (Jennings 2008), and *Toni Morrison's Beloved: Origins* (Tally 2008). Jennings (2008: 21) focuses on the central role of West African religious symbols in the novelist's *œuvre*, and argues that Morrison lays bare the 'superimposition of European-American cultural inscriptions' onto an 'African palimpsest'. Tally's work (2008: p. xv) is a detailed investigation of the way classical and African referents—exclusively in *Beloved*—'come together to form a whole', and its many subjects include the novel's relationship between the Greek Demeter and the Egyptian Isis. In my own readings of Morrison's concern with African and Graeco-Roman interactions, however, I am less concerned than are Jennings (implicitly) and Tally (explicitly) to partake in and extend sociological and historiographical debate—in Tally's words (2008: p. xv), to

⁴ On Hopkins, see Carby (1987) and Walters (2007).

provide 'an answer to the contentious contemporary arguments over the very origins of civilization'. I wish to emphasize less Morrison's excavations of 'truth' or 'fact', and more what I call her 'reinvention of tradition', the way she exploits the privileges of the imaginary, or the licence of the fiction writer, to political ends. I argue that her characters' identification with a performed 'Egyptianness', for example, or her recent interest in the lore surrounding the fabulist Aesop, form an emancipatory process to which notions of 'authenticity' or 'originality' are ultimately an irrelevance.

AFRICAN CLASSICISM; CLASSICAL AFRICANNESS

Goff and Simpson (2007: 7) rightly observe that 'Classical Greek culture has been successfully, if not inevitably and perpetually, annexed by European culture; any disengagement of these cultures thus requires considerable labour on the part of those works effecting it'. In her second novel, *Sula* (1973), in a little-discussed passage in which the eponymous heroine fantasizes about her lover, Morrison stages exactly this kind of 'disengagement' when Sula conceives of Ajax/A. Jacks as a statue that she turns back into loam. In her mind, she 'scrape[s] away' at the blackness of his skin, revealing first a 'gold-leaf' and then an 'alabaster' form to be underneath. She imagines she can 'tap away at the alabaster' and that 'through the breaks [she] will see the loam' (2005d: 130; emphasis in original). She recollects his skin in one breathless and crucial sentence:

So black that only a careful rubbing with steel wool would remove it, and as it was removed there was the glint of gold leaf and under the gold leaf the cold alabaster and deep, deep down under the cold alabaster more black only this time the black of warm loam. (2005d: 135)

The meditation brings to mind motifs of cultural layeredness in other African American texts, such as Tod Clifton's cheek in Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, *Invisible Man* (1995: 363), or the various boxes within which the Book of Thoth is supposedly hidden in Ishmael Reed's 1972 *Mumbo Jumbo* (1988: 197). But my specific contention here is that, through the revelation of the chthonic blackness that the whiteness of the conventional classical statue covers up, Morrison asserts the African influences on a classical tradition that has been strategically

'whitened' by the dominant culture. She uncovers what she has called, in a 1981 interview, 'that civilization that existed underneath the white civilization' (Taylor-Guthrie 1994: 121).

Sula's transformation of Ajax from a person through a statue to clay enacts a canny reversal of several myths of origin or artistic production in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. As I go on to show, the Latin poem is fundamental to the reconnection between Greece, Rome, and Africa that Morrison's fiction enacts. Here, most obviously, the novelist is playing with the politics of race and gender implicit in the story of Pygmalion. Ovid represents Pygmalion as sculptor who, in celibate disgust at the sexual impropriety of the Propoetides, creates a 'snow-white' ivory statue whom Venus brings to life to be his lover (*Met.* 10.247–8).⁵ At the same time, Sula's fantasy also reverses the actions of Deucalion and Pyrrha, who in Ovid's poem 'repopulate the world' after the flood with stones that are metamorphosed 'like the first rough-hewn marble of a statue' (*Met.* 1.363, I.406). And Deucalion, the son of Prometheus, explicitly invokes the Promethean creation of man from 'moulded clay' that comprises the third Ovidian myth with which Morrison engages here (*Met.* 1.364). 'Thus earth, once crude and featureless . . . | Put on the unknown form of human kind', writes Ovid (*Met.* 1.87–8). Sula's multi-layered meditation, therefore, disrupts the received hierarchies of Western intellectual heritage through the inversion of classical creation myth.

Some readers may resist my interpretation of Ajax's imagined earthiness as a reversal of Ovidian processes, arguing that it comprises a Eurocentric concealment of an African cultural reference. As Mbiti (1990: 84–5) writes, 'in many parts of Africa . . . it is believed that God used clay to make the first man and wife', and hence 'God has the name of Potter or Moulder in many areas'. Alice Walker (1992: 216) invokes this African 'notion that the first human beings were themselves made out of clay' in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. But both the fact of the similarity between the African and Greek creation myths, and any resistance to my classical interpretation of the passage in *Sula*, are pertinent to my argument. It is impossible to determine whether Sula's fantasy ultimately alludes to classical or to African myth; it clearly depends on both. This dual frame of reference exemplifies Morrison's recurring insistence on the affinity between

⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Graeco-Roman and African cultural legacies that both the Eurocentric hegemony of many centuries and certain Afrocentric perspectives of recent decades have been reluctant to acknowledge.

To some extent, Morrison is interested less in issues of 'priority' or 'derivation' than in what she perceives to be a 'sympathy' between Greek and African culture. She shares this perception with Soyinka (1976: 14), who in *Myth, Literature and African World* details 'fascinating instance[s] of structural parallels' between Ancient Greek and Yoruba world views. There are discernible echoes of Soyinka's observation in the novelist's 'Unspeakable' essay, in which she comments on Greek tragedy's 'similarity to Afro-American communal structures (the function of song and chorus, the heroic struggle between the claims of community and individual *hubris*) and African religion and philosophy' (Morrison 1989: 2). While Soyinka's *Bacchae of Euripides* (1973b) clearly has much in common with *Sula* and with *Paradise* in its thematic concern with purity and impurity, and with the rational and the irrational, it is also important to acknowledge the very probable influence of his lesser-known 1964 play, *The Strong Breed*, on *The Bluest Eye*. In her first novel, Morrison's portrayal of the scapegoating of Pecola has affinities with both the expulsion of the *pharmakos* in the Greek *Thargelia* festival and with African purification ritual such as that critiqued by Soyinka in his depiction of Eman and Ifada in the early play.⁶ As it is in *Sula*, Morrison's allusiveness in her account of Pecola's fate is at once African and classical; to borrow the words of Paul Gilroy (1993: 190), it works to 'undermine the purified appeal of either Afrocentrism or the Eurocentrism it struggles to answer'.

Critics have paid scant attention to the fact that, in 1972, a little-known Toni Morrison (still in her early days in the trade department at Random House) edited and published an anthology entitled *Contemporary African Literature* (Makward and Lacy 1972). Among work by Achebe, Senghor, and Fugard is an excerpt from Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, and of equal significance is a passage on 'The Concept of Time' from Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969).⁷ Morrison was

⁶ On the Greek *Thargelia*, see Parker (1983).

⁷ Though Makward and Lacy are listed as the official editors of *Contemporary African Literature*, Morrison is listed as the 'project editor' (1972: p. v). Though now out of print, the book has remained important to Morrison: in 2003 she gave a copy of

doubtless conversant with another chapter in Mbiti's book, 'The Concept of Evil, Ethics and Justice', in which he records the traditional African belief in the 'living-dead', spirits who 'if they are not properly buried, or have a grudge . . . take revenge or punish the offenders' (1969: 204–5). Several scholars have now documented Morrison's engagement with West African conceptions of the vengeful spirit, in *Beloved* in particular: among them Jennings's study of the Kikongo concept of *kanda* (the living-dead ancestor) and of the Yoruban *abiku* or 'wandering spirit-child' is the most rigorous and compelling (see Jennings 2008: 23–136, esp. 63–6).⁸ But these cultural referents do not negate the coexistence of Morrison's widespread engagement with the *Oresteia*, in particular with Aeschylan images of contaminating blood and with the Attic playwright's ultimate refutation of the efficacy of revenge. It is arguable that the reluctance of many critics to acknowledge the double frame of reference demands more urgent attention than does the duality itself. For too long, a falsifying and unnecessary critical polarization has made Morrison a pawn in a struggle rooted in the culture wars of the 1980s. The occasional but recurring attempts to claim her 'most significant' influences as somehow and nonsensically either 'African' or 'European', and an oversimplifying conflation of these descriptors with 'black' and 'white', reinscribes a notion of intellectual purity that ultimately serves the dominant culture and that her novels themselves strongly contest.

EGYPT AND ETHIOPIA: FIRST WORLDS OF THE WORLD?

In 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken', Morrison (1989: 2) urges on the moment 'when Western civilization owns up to its own sources in the cultures that preceded it'. While as essayist she laments, in a paraphrase of Bernal (and an echo of Diop), that it took 'some seventy

it to the *New Yorker* journalist Hilton Als (Als 2003: 70). A second anthology to which Morrison contributed while at Random House, *Giant Talk: An Anthology of Third World Writing*, ed. Quincy Troupe and Rainer Schulte (1975), includes (among many African pieces) the poem *Après la Guerre* by Soyinka; see Wall (2007: 141–2).

⁸ Other scholarship on Morrison and Soyinka includes Grewal (1998) and Ogunyemi (2002).

years' to 'eliminate Egypt as the cradle of civilization . . . and replace it with Greece' (1989: 6), in her fictional representations she counteracts this elimination. For example, in *Tar Baby* (1981) she explicitly enlists a transformative configuration of Egypt as an ancestral civilization. There, the tree spirits who discover Jadine sinking in the mud are 'arrogant, . . . knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties; that they alone could hold together the stones of pyramids and the rushes of Moses's crib' (2004: 183). This description constructs the women as a potent fusion of Israeli slaves and Pharaonic culture. Gilroy (1993: 207) has argued that African American 'identification with the Exodus narrative . . . seems to be waning' and that 'blacks today appear to identify far more readily with the glamorous pharaohs'. But, characteristically, Morrison avoids making that distinction; instead she identifies with a combination of the two. This doubleness at once draws attention to the actual symbiosis between dynastic wealth and slave labour in Egyptian cultural production and has the paradoxical resonance of newly invented myth.

Gilroy (1993: 130) analyses the insistence of Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Edward Wilmot Blyden that 'the roots of European civilization lay in African sources'. His assertions that 'the appeal of Egypt as evidence of the greatness of pre-slave African cultures . . . has had a special significance within black Atlantic responses to modernity', and that Egypt is useful for showing 'that the path [to civilization] began in Africa not Greece', are obviously central to my argument (1993: 60). But it is interesting that, despite his explicit admiration for Toni Morrison in this book, he discusses neither her own interest in Egypt nor the specific dominant American cultural context that African American 'Egyptianism' such as Morrison's confronts. As Richard G. Carrott demonstrates in *The Egyptian Revival* (1978), and as John T. Irwin examines in *American Hieroglyphics* (1980), the decipherment of the Rosetta stone by Champollion in the 1820s gave rise in America to a widespread architectural and literary engagement with Ancient Egypt. Irwin's discussion (1980: 3) of Emerson, Poe, Thoreau, Melville, and Hawthorne indirectly reveals how these authors appropriated the hieroglyphic to their consideration of Puritan hermeneutics, while Carrott's discussion of the Washington Monument, designed in 1833, illuminates the deployment of Egypt in the expression of dominant American ideology. Carrott's analysis (1978: 82) of the Revival

architecture's 'reduced formal vocabulary' that 'provided a final expression for Romantic classicism' reveals the mainstream construction of Egypt as a kind of poor but pure sibling to Greece and Rome. His describing American adaptations of Egyptian style as 'a kind of architectural *Ovid moralisé*' is instructive (1978: 133): as were the Greece and Rome on which America was even more dependent, Egypt was morally as well as racially purified in the service of the dominant culture.

While there was significant abolitionist identification with Egypt and its Graeco-Roman connections in nineteenth-century America, at the same time other historically specific American deployments of Egypt have necessitated a more recent black redeployment of that culture. These include the nineteenth-century conception of the Mississippi River as the 'American Nile', which gave rise to the naming of its valley cities Cairo, Karnac, Thebes, and Memphis (Carrott 1978: 50), as well as the fact that, after the Civil War, obelisks and pyramids appeared across the South as part of its memorialization of the Confederate cause (Blight 2001: 77). David Duke's recent championing of the Liberty Place Monument in New Orleans—described by Joseph Roach (1996: 240) as a 'twenty-foot-high granite obelisk . . . burnished white in the imposingly funereal tradition of circum-Atlantic amnesia'—is an extreme recurrence of the same kind of appropriation. These various and conflicting American uses of Egypt give a certain urgency to African American 'Egyptianism' and to Morrison's place within it. The metaphor with which she describes Milkman's shock at flooring his father in *Song of Solomon* (1977) perfectly expresses the dismantling of the false, dominant cultural versions of Egypt that her novels enact. 'There was the pain and shame of seeing his father crumple . . .', Milkman realizes, 'sorrow in discovering that the pyramid was not a five-thousand-year wonder of the civilized world . . . but that it had been made in the back room at Sears, by a clever window dresser, of papier-mâché, guaranteed to last a mere lifetime' (Morrison 2005c: 68).

Morrison's redeployment of Egyptian heritage continues in *Beloved*, where the name 'Sethe' brings to mind the Egyptian god Set or Seth.⁹ Reed illustrates in *Mumbo Jumbo* that, as the power-crazed

⁹ See Tally (2008) for discussion of the confluences in Egyptian and Greek cultures as they relate to Morrison's *Beloved*, of Irwin's reading of Thoreau, and of Egyptian deities.

über-rational murderer of his brother Osiris, Set has much in common with the power-crazed, über-rational aspects of American governance. 'Sethe', denoting the protagonist of a novel that challenges Enlightenment values in so many ways, reconciles the 'exceptional femaleness' and 'sacred properties' of the Egyptian spirits of *Tar Baby* (Morrison 2004: 183) with the prevailing image of Set as (in Reed's words) 'the 1st man to shut nature out of himself' (1988: 162). The name also engages the Abbé Terrasson's novel of 1731, *Sêthos*, which, as Bernal (1987: 180) discusses, 'became the standard Masonic source of information about Egypt'. Terrasson's work depicts an imperialist Prince Sêthos, who, in the century before the Trojan War, 'travels around Africa and Asia setting up cities and establishing laws'; the novel is notable for its detailed and repeated insistence on 'the great superiority of Egypt over Greece' and of the former's many cultural legacies to the latter (Bernal 1987: 180). Morrison's 'Sethe' simultaneously engages this assertion of Egypt's classicism and protests the racism of the white Masonic movement that is discussed by Bernal and parodied by *Mumbo Jumbo*.

In *Jazz* (1992), in the rural South of Joe Trace's memory, the community still identifies with the Israelite presence in Egypt. Joe recalls 'the voices of the women . . . singing "Go down, go down, way down in Egypt land"' (Morrison 2005b: 226). But, in the same novel, the inhabitants of 1920s Harlem identify with the Egyptian hegemony. Morrison (2005b: 24, 29, 38, 94, 119) mentions five times that the beauty products Joe sells are branded 'Cleopatra'. Violet, meanwhile, fantasizes about her father making one of his miraculous reappearances in Rome—her significantly named Virginian birthplace—with 'a tin of Frieda's Egyptian Hair Pomade' in his pocket (2005b: 100). Historically, of course, Cleopatra was descended from the Greek Ptolemaic dynasty, and assertions of her 'blackness' are criticized as inaccurate by Classicists such as Mary Lefkowitz (1996: p. xiv). But, given that 'the Ptolemies were both Egyptian pharaohs and Greek monarchs' (Thompson 2003), Cleopatra epitomizes the cultural fusion of Greece and Egypt, and African American identification with her can be read as a strategic performance. In his analysis of the New Orleans Mardi Gras, Roach (1996: 25) writes of the character 'Trickster-Zulu' that he is 'not an African retention but a circum-Atlantic reinvention'. Morrison's characters' allusion through their physical appearance to a fabricated Egyptianness constitutes the same process: *Jazz* performs the 'Nu Nile' for which the hair treatment

in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* is named (1999a: 39; 2005d: 3). In Ellison's *Invisible Man* the African American emancipatory tradition of 'Ethiopianism'—which draws its inspiration, as Blight (2001: 322) notes, from the prophecy of Psalm 68 that 'princes shall come out of Egypt and Ethiopia'—is exhausted and impotent. But the contemporary novelist reinvigorates the convention through her depiction of a Harlem in which 'racks of yellow headscarfs; strings of Egyptian beads' are on sale (Morrison 2005b: 63).

Morrison restores the energy of Du Bois's *Star of Ethiopia* pageant, which was performed (in front of an Egyptian-temple backdrop) at New York's National Emancipation Exposition of 1913, and has been described by Blight (2001: 377) as 'a story of tragedy, transcendence, and redemption, of romantic African origins and American transformation'. She plays with the idea of 'romantic African origins' throughout her *œuvre*, but does so most explicitly in *Paradise*, where Richard Misner's fantasy of returning to a 'real earthly home' neatly puts the Western intellectual tradition in perspective. Misner dreams of going back 'past the whole of Western history, past the beginning of organized knowledge, past pyramids and poison bows' (Morrison 1999b: 213). And in the same novel, through a heavily veiled and revisionary allusion to the account of Phaethon and Helios in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the author's representation of Connie and Deacon's affair invokes a mythological theory of 'African origins'. The couple's passion restores nature to 'the original world designed for the two of them' (1999b: 229), and the place where they make love—a 'burned out farmhouse' by 'two fig trees growing into each other'—invokes a classical version of the origins of Africa itself (1999b: 230). Beyond the entwined trees' allusion to the Ovidian Baucis and Philemon (*Met.* 8.720), of specific relevance here is Connie's comparison of the house to one 'built on the sand waves of the lonely Sahara', and the likening of the ruins to 'a statuary of ash people' (1999b: 233–4). In the *Metamorphoses*, the global fire that breaks out when Phaethon loses control of the solar chariot both turns the Ethiopians black and forms the Libyan Sahara (*Met.* 2.227–37). The Greek myth configured in Latin verse assumes the Greek world's anteriority to the African, but *Paradise* reverses this order by asserting that it is the burned-out, Sahara-like place where the lovers have sex that comprises 'the original world' (1999b: 229).

AFRICA AND RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

The fact that Joe Trace trips over 'black roots' while looking for his mother in *Jazz* symbolizes the fact that ultimately Morrison's novels concern themselves less with a nostalgic return to African roots than with the reconfigurations of that continent's cultures in America (Morrison 2005b: 179, 19). And, in *Paradise*, the productive coexistence of Africa and Christianity in Richard Misner's world view reflects Morrison's interest in the intersections between Ancient Egyptian and Christian cultures. In the following discussion of her contribution to the Van der Zee, Billops, and Dodson collaboration of 1978, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, and of the use of a text from the Nag Hammadi library in the epigraphs to both *Jazz* and *Paradise*, it is useful to bear in mind Bernal's observation (1987: 191) that before the eighteenth century 'the tension . . . between Christianity and the Egyptian "twofold" philosophy was not . . . an "antagonistic" one'. It is also worth remembering that Christianity 'came to Africa before it reached Europe', and that 'it is believed in Egypt that Christianity was first brought there by St Mark . . . in the year 42 AD' (Mbiti 1990: 182, 180).

While many critics illuminate the fact that Morrison cites *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (Van der Zee et al. 1978) as her inspiration for Dorcas in *Jazz*, they tend not to analyse this source itself in any detail.¹⁰ It is an unconventional, hybrid text, combining Van der Zee's photographs of 'the Harlem rituals of death'—corpses prepared for their funerals—with poetry by Owen Dodson, commentary by Camille Billops, and a foreword by Morrison (Van der Zee et al. 1978: 1). Billops asserts that the mourning rites 'have parallels with those of the ancient necropolis of Egypt' and 'are in continuum with those on the Nile of four thousand years ago' (Van der Zee et al. 1978: 1). What is interesting about this claim is that, except for the architectural style of the church in the first photograph, there is no explicit Egyptian iconography in the pictures themselves. The representation of these Christian ceremonies as Egyptian is for the most part a performance of 1978, anticipating Morrison's strategy in *Jazz*. And the final

¹⁰ Morrison mentions this source several times (e.g. Taylor-Guthrie 1994: 207; Morrison 2005b: p. ix). See also Conner (2000) for discussion of the work's importance to *Jazz*.

sentence of Morrison's foreword speaks to my concerns in this chapter as a whole: the book, she writes, 'enlightens us as only memory can' (Van der Zee 1978: n.p.). Her choice of verb reflects the redefinition of 'enlightenment' that her novels' engagement with Greek, Roman, and Egyptian traditions effects.

Gilroy (1993: 60) notes that Egypt has 'provided the symbolic means to locate the diaspora's critique of Enlightenment universals outside the philosophical repertoire of the West'. Morrison achieves the same process through quoting from 'Thunder: Perfect Mind', one of the Coptic Gnostic texts of the Nag Hammadi library, in her epigraphs to *Jazz* and *Paradise*. As well as enlisting the philosophical and political radicalism of these texts to endorse her own themes, in allying her work with this collection she reiterates her interest in the interactions between ancient Egyptian religion and Judaeo-Christian tradition and between Greece and Egypt. It is significant that one of the many paradoxes in 'Thunder: Perfect Mind' exactly expresses the inseparable nature of Greek and Egyptian identity with which the novelist is concerned:

I am the wisdom [of the] Greeks
And the knowledge of [the] barbarians.
I am the one whose image is great in Egypt
And the one who has no image among the barbarians.

(Parrott 1996: 299; translator's brackets)

There could hardly be a less 'pure' body of work than the Nag Hammadi texts. The library 'involves the collecting of what was originally a Greek literary productivity by largely unrelated and anonymous authors spread through the eastern half of the ancient world' (Robinson 1996: 13). The texts were 'originally composed in Greek' but were then translated into Coptic; Coptic, being 'the Egyptian language written with the Greek alphabet', itself epitomizes hybridity (Robinson 1996: 12–13). The very existence of this language testifies to what Bernal (1997: 30) calls 'the triangular relationship between Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece and Christianity', and to the cultural syncretism to which first Greek and then Roman conquests of Egypt gave rise. Morrison's engagement with Coptic Gnosticism exemplifies the rereading (or rewriting) of 'sources' that the 'fabrication of Ancient Greece' has necessitated (Morrison 1989: 7).

accounts, was Ethiopian' (Snowden 1970: 188). While Lefkowitz (1996: 31) refutes this claim, even she concedes that 'ancient accounts of his 'life' say that he was dark . . . and flat-nosed'. Whether or not a 'real' Aesop existed, and whether or not he was African, is ultimately irrelevant to the African American novelist's project. The legendary Aesop reverberates in her retellings of his tales, simultaneously working against the whitening of classical tradition and the Americanness that that whitened tradition has underpinned.

CONCLUSION: SPLITTING OPEN THE WORLD

In the autumn of 2006, when Toni Morrison was Guest Curator at the Musée du Louvre, she designed three *parcours* or itineraries through the Antiquities collections, which were centred on her chosen overall theme, the richly ambiguous phrase '*Étranger chez soi*', or 'The Foreigner's Home'. She selected artefacts that illuminated three perspectives: 'Figures of Foreigners in the Land of Egypt'; 'Foreignness in the Greek City: Some Images of Woman in Ancient Greece', and 'Foreigners in the Assyrian Empire'.¹³ Her curatorship emphasized both the hybridized nature of the ancient world and the implications for modernity when the hybridity of that world is recognized. It thus echoed strikingly the concerns in her fiction that this chapter has explored.

The restoration of Africa to classical tradition that the Morrisonian *œuvre* effects, and the restored or reinvented world view that this enables, is exemplified by a passage in *The Bluest Eye*. There, one of Cholly's few happy memories of childhood includes a 4 July church picnic at which he shares the heart of a watermelon with his friend Blue Jack. As an adult Cholly still recalls the sight of the man who broke the watermelon. Morrison configures this 'figure etched against the bright blue sky' as a kind of transformed Atlas: 'The father of the family lifted the melon high over his head', she writes, 'his big arms

¹³ These details are translated by me from the Musée du Louvre leaflet 'Le Louvre Invite: Toni Morrison "Étranger Chez Soi": Parcours dans les trois départements archéologiques, 13 octobre 2006–15 janvier 2007'. At the Warwick conference, 'African Athena: Black Athena 20 Years On', November 2008, Juliette Becq presented a paper on Morrison's selection of Greek artefacts, 'Toni Morrison, Guest of the Louvre: In Search of the Greek Vases'.

looked taller than the trees to Cholly, and the melon blotted out the sun' (1999a: 104). The boy is mesmerized by the sight of this man, 'holding the world in his hands . . . blotting out the sun and getting ready to split open the world' (1999a: 105). In classical tradition Atlas is variously an unsuccessfully rebellious Titan, condemned to hold up the sky, or (as in the *Metamorphoses*) a giant turned to stone by the Medusa's head, and thus transformed into Mount Atlas in present-day Morocco (*Met.* 4.657). He is conventionally represented, somewhat paradoxically, as holding up the globe or carrying the world on his shoulders, and in recent centuries he has functioned as a symbol of endurance. Morrison's summoning of Atlas to a black community's church picnic is one means by which she reconnects Christianity with Africa. Her revised conception of a classical figure as 'blotting out the sun' is highly symbolic: it embodies her *œuvre's* challenge to the Enlightenment world view—to its rationalism and to what Paul Gilroy (1993: 59) has called the 'the hellomaniacal excision of Africa from the narrative of civilization's development'. In classical tradition Atlas is cowed by the Olympians into becoming a pillar of world order, forced to keep the sky and earth apart. The Atlas on the church picnic, in contrast, is preparing to 'split open that world' (Morrison 1999a: 105).

Later in *The Bluest Eye*, Soaphead Church recalls his mixed-race grandmother and her continual striving 'to separate herself in mind, body and spirit from all that suggested Africa' (Morrison 1999a: 133). Morrison's writing reverses this impulse: she reconnects classicism—and the America that it underpins—with its origins in and with all its interactions and affinities with African cultures of both the West and the North. Sula's uncovering of the black material within the alabaster statue thus mirrors the processes that Morrison's work itself enacts. The novelist's insistence on the African presences in the classical tradition has broad implications: it contributes to the ongoing process of re-viewing that body of culture as something always and already impure and unstable, pre-national and pre-disciplinary. Morrison's strategic allusiveness suggests that the terms 'black classicism', *classica africana* (Ronnick 2004), and even 'African Athena', may in the final analysis be both misleading and unhelpful. For all these categories, qualified by descriptors of colour and/or provenance, ultimately reinforce the notion of a pre-existing 'classicism' that is (somehow and nonsensically) at once universal, European, and white. Surely this—the idea that 'classicism' (unqualified) implies a white, European tradition—is the ultimate fabrication beyond which we must move.